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ABSTRACT

This review of literature on the need for educational reform in America focuses on the following seven reports, all of which were published in 1983: (1) "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," by the National Commission on Excellence in Education; (2) "Action for Excellence," by the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, chaired by North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt, Jr.; (3) "Educating Our Citizens: The Search for Excellence," by Walter Fritz Mondale and the Center for National Policy; (4) "Making the Grade," by the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy; (5) the Carnegie Foundation's "High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America"; (6) "Educating Americans for the 21st Century," by the National Science Board's Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology; and (7) the College Board's "Academic Preparation for College." Following reviews of these seven reports concerned primarily with secondary education, attention is devoted to the 1982 report of the National Commission on Higher Education Issues entitled, "To Strengthen Quality in Higher Education." (JBM)

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THE RISING TIDE OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM:

A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

Assessing the quality of American education has been a national pastime. Several major panels and commissions joined the national debate in 1983 and issued reports which examined the quality of education and found an emergency situation. Concentration is centered on reports published in 1983 which focused on the public schools. In addition, one 1982 report is included which focused on higher education to round out the scope. Thus reforms covering the spectrum of education from K through college are touched on.

The reports cataloged many shortcomings and called for improvement and reform--reform that is needed to keep our technological achievements on a par with other countries and for the survival of our country. All were committed to the goals of excellence and restoring public confidence in education. Excellence has again become a buzzword as it was in the 1958 report of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, The Pursuit of Excellence: Education and the Future of America. And as in this report, additional study in mathematics, science, and foreign languages was recommended in the numerous critiques. In addition, the 1982 and 1983 reports entered the electronic society and recommended computer literacy as basic.

One of the first reports to gain front-page headlines in the spring of 1983 was A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. Authored by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, this Commission was created by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell in 1981. The Commission cast a critical eye on the quality of education and found not excellence, but

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mediocrity--a rising tide of mediocrity.

The report focused on high schools and painted a bleak picture. Declining trends were found in achievement, curriculum, teaching, standards, and school time. One finding indicating poor quality education was that achievement test scores of both high school and college students have declined over the past two decades. Student achievement has fallen behind that of other nations and the average graduate of our schools and colleges is not as well educated as students a quarter century ago. There is a high degree of functional illiteracy among adults, and many seventeen-year-olds are deficient in basic reading, writing, and mathematical skills. More and more high school graduates are ready neither for college or work at a time when new technology and the electronic society require new skills. Mathematics, science, social studies and foreign languages are shortchanged in the high school curriculum. Frequently requirements can be met by electives, and personal service and development courses. Many who enter the teaching profession are drawn from the bottom quarter of their graduating class, and their courses are heavily weighted with educational methods courses at the expense of subject matter courses. There is a severe shortage of mathematics and science teachers, and teachers for special students. Teachers are underpaid. Negligible time is spent on homework, and, as compared with other nations, the school day and school year are shorter.

Recommendations cover the gamut from homework to fiscal support. The factor of time figured predominately in the recommendations. An increase in homework for high school students, a seven hour school day, a two-hundred to two-hundred-twenty-day school year, and an eleven month contract for teachers

were recommended. To strengthen teacher quality, teacher preparation programs should be upgraded and teacher salaries should be increased. A system of career ladders for teachers should be developed culminating in master teachers at the top rung.

The Commission recommended that high school graduation requirements be strengthened in five New Basics. The New Basics are four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, two years of foreign language were strongly recommended. In turn, colleges and universities should raise admission requirements in these areas.

The report placed primary responsibility for fiscal support at the state and local level, with the federal government sharing the responsibility for special students.

Making headlines within a few days of A Nation At Risk was the report of the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth chaired by Governor James B. Hunt, Jr. of North Carolina. The Task Force was a project of the Education Commission of the States. The report, entitled Action for Excellence, echoed the theme of A Nation At Risk that our national survival and economic growth are at stake, and declared a state of emergency. It reiterated serious deficiencies cataloged in A Nation At Risk. An immediate and urgent need for action was called for: action for excellence.

This Task Force did not just talk about the weather; it would do something about it. It spelled out concrete steps to be taken to improve education. It placed chief responsibility for education at the state and local level It recommended that each governor set up State Task Forces on Education for Economic Growth and that each school district develop plans for improving

education. Higher priority of state and local budgets to education would be necessary with support of the federal government. It called for closer collaboration and partnerships among business leaders, labor leaders, members of the professions, governors, legislators, and educators. The federal government should continue its supporting role to state and local governments, especially in extending help to special students.

Longer school days and years were recommended as well as toughened curriculum and use of modern technology. The Task Force advocated higher pay for teachers and merit pay for outstanding performance, as well as a system of career ladders. Improved management at every level and more effective leadership of school principals were called for.

The report redefined basic skills to go beyond minimum competencies in reading, writing, and computation. The increasing technological demands require more complex skills of analyzing and problem solving. Advancing technological change requires learning-to-learn skills--the ability to acquire new skills on the job.

The Task Force had an eye on students as future employees, and identified the relationship between education and economic growth.

Since the price of excellence is high, the Center for National Policy came up with a unique solution: pay for it. Its report, entitled Educating Our Citizens: The Search for Excellence, called for large infusions of federal money as the answer to the nation's school problems. The author, Walter Fritz Mondale, proposed boosting federal aid to education by $11 billion a year.

Part of the billions would be poured into a new National Fund for Excellence and a new Education Corps. The Fund for Excellence would make resources available to communities to carry out locally developed plans for excellence. Every community would create its own commission on excellence in education.

The Fund would also make resources available to states to strengthen statewide educational standards and curriculum. An Education Corps would concentrate on teacher quality and teacher shortages in critical fields and geographical areas.

Other measures would strengthen classroom teaching, modernize university research laboratories and libraries, support graduate education, and provide new support for international education and exchange programs. Mondale also expressed his commitment to provision of quality education for all children, including the disadvantaged, handicapped, and minority.

Mondale was careful to point out that Washington would not impose a national program on communities. Rather federal leadership would enable communities to meet their own educational needs and to carry out their priorities for upgrading standards.

Essays were also included by Alonzo A. Crim and Denis P. Doyle.

Alonzo Crim, mayor of Atlanta, related the strides made in the Atlanta school system where many of the students were poor, minority children.

Doyle, a Resident Fellow in Education at the American Enterprise Institute, took the opposite viewpoint from Mondale and did not believe that massive infusions of money would solve problems. Rather he suggested that the federal government provide limited funds or challenge grants to states for planning and redesigning their school systems. He would make the best of existing resources and move toward improvement by structural and organizational changes. An example would be tougher college admission requirements, spelling out what students should be required to know. High schools should raise their graduation requirements accordingly.

Another national panel which noted that educational improvement is needed was the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy. This Task Force's study, Making the Grade, called on the federal government to take the initiative in pulling education from its straits. At the same time, federal aid should not override local and state responsibility.

Expectations that the schools assume many roles should be pared so that they may not lose sight of their fundamental purposes. A core curriculum should cover reading, writing, calculating, computer capability, science, foreign languages, and civics.

Proficiency in the English language was singled out as the most important goal in elementary and secondary education. Proficiency in a foreign language and increased training in mathematics and science were also emphasized.

Higher salaries for teachers and a reward system for teaching excellence were recommended. (Example: $40,000 a year for five years in addition to regular salary).

The role of the federal government would include continued support of equality of opportunity for the poor and handicapped, and also illegal aliens and immigrants. Individualized programs, or miniature academies, should be provided for those who fail repeatedly.

The federal government should continue doing what it does well in the areas of collecting statistics and data, basic research in education, and evaluation of federally supported educational programs.

The salvos of spring 1983 were reinforced by further salvos in the fall of 1983 by the publication of two analyses by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the National Science Board's Commission on

Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology.

The Carnegie Foundation's in-depth examination of high schools, High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America, focused on teachers as the key to solving many of the problems high schools face. Improving teacher quality, working conditions, and salaries were major elements discussed. To attract better students to the teaching profession, proposals for full tuition scholarships for top prospective public school teachers were outlined. Changes in teacher training and education would include a core of common learning, rigorous standards for admittance to teacher education programs, a major in an academic discipline not education, and a fifth year of education weighted courses and classroom experience.

Working conditions would be improved by eliminating much paperwork and routine chores. Salary increases and a redistribution of education dollars were recommended. It was pointed out that the percentage of funds for teacher salaries has been declining while that for administration has been going up.

Innovations concerning high school students included replacing the S. A. T. with S. A. A. T. (Student Achievement and Advisement Test), community service as a requirement for graduation, and tightened curriculum. The S. A. A. T. would be linked to the student's core curriculum and would help students make decisions about their future goals. The curriculum would emphasize English, writing, and foreign language. A select few would become experts in mathematics and science to be the leaders in the high-tech race.

Closer cooperation was called for between higher education and public schools through partnerships. School-College Coordination Panels should be established in every state for consultation and collaboration on curriculum

and programs.

Mathematics and science took a preeminent place in the limelight with the publication of Educating Americans for the 21st Century by the National Science Board's Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology.

The report saw teachers as the key to quality in the classroom and outlined proposals for upgrading teacher training, such as: stronger mathematics and science background for prospective elementary school teachers, a major in science or mathematics for secondary school teachers, familiarity with computers for all teachers, tightened state certification requirements, and continuing teacher training and retraining programs. Better working conditions, better compensation for high quality teachers, and high salaries for mathematics and science teachers were recommended.

Along with quality teaching, mathematics, science, and technology curriculum was emphasized. To upgrade schools it was recommended that a network of exemplary or model programs in mathematics, science, and technology be established. Initially 2,000 such programs should be established: 1,000 each at elementary and secondary schools. Eventually they should be established in every community.

More time should be spent on mathematics and science in elementary schools each day, an hour of mathematics and thirty minutes of science. High school courses should be increased to three years each of mathematics and science. These requirements should include computer science. High school graduation requirements did not mesh with college admission requirements. Four years each of mathematics and science were recommended for college admission.

For planning, coordination, and evaluation purposes it was recommended that the following councils be established: National Education Council; Mathematics, Science, and Technology Curriculum Council; Council for Technology Application in Education; and Governors' Councils.

Like the Mondale report, Educating Americans for the 21st Century carried a high price tag. Detailed recommendations for federal spending were made. The Commission aimed for 1995 as the deadline to accomplish objectives.

The College Board picked up where most of the reports left off. In 1980, the College Board initiated its Educational Equality Project with excellence and equality of opportunity for postsecondary education as its goals. Various studies and recommendations culminated in May 1983 with the publication of Academic Preparation for College. This booklet provides a blueprint of what high school students need to know and be able to do. It is intended to serve as a framework for developing secondary school curricula and focuses on learning outcomes. It is geared toward the college bound but will be valuable to those going directly to the workplace. It spells out the knowledge and skills needed by all college entrants under six Basic Academic Competencies and six Basic Academic Skills. The Basic Academic Competencies needed for all disciplines are reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, reasoning, and studying. The Basic Academic Subjects describe what students need to learn in English, the arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign language. In addition, computer competency is identified as an emerging need.

The competencies and subject mastery were shown to be interdependent. The focus was on doing well, not just doing time.

The foregoing analyses focused on the public schools. A counterpart which addressed improving the quality of higher education was the report of the National Commission on Higher Education Issues, To Strengthen Quality of Higher Education.

Upgrading the college curriculum echoed the New Basics promulgated in A Nation At Risk. The following high school units were recommended for college preparation: four years of English, three years of mathematics and computation, two years of science, two years of foreign language, and three years distributed among the social sciences and the humanities.

The report took to task funding mechanisms for public institutions based on enrollment formulas, line-item budgets, and year-end reversion of unexpended appropriations. Priorities would have to be established in a time of budget cutting and limited resources without jeopardizing quality. The Commission would have funds distributed on a competitive basis to institutions for special projects of high quality.

The report called for accreditation studies to be focused on basic academic competencies of students rather than allocation of resources, faculty salaries, facilities, and administrative support. The latter four factors should be left to the discretion of institutions.

The study pointed out the need to improve teacher preparation programs, affirmed the importance of faculty tenure, and placed increasing faculty salaries among the high priorities. All sources of funds should be pursued.

Reform measures could usher in far-reaching changes in schools and colleges. Perhaps the decade of the 1980's will be known as the decade of educational reform.

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